

Grand Traverse Regional Market Takes Another Step Forward

By: Rob Sirrine

The results of the Grand Traverse Regional Market (GTRM) Feasibility Study are in. Six months ago, with funding from the Michigan Economic Development Corporation, the GTRM advisory board and Traverse Bay Economic Development Corporation hired Market Ventures Inc., a national consultant firm that specializes in Public Markets, to complete a feasibility analysis for creating a “food hub” at Building 58 at the Grand Traverse Commons. For those who are unfamiliar with “food hubs”, the USDA’s working definition is: “A centrally located facility with a business management structure facilitating the aggregation, storage, processing, distribution, and/or marketing of locally/regionally produced food products.”

The following development goals were used to guide the planning, development, and operation of the GTRM: Raise income for the region’s farmers and food producers, Increase availability and access to local foods for area consumers, Create a social space for the community, Create jobs, and Encourage education and knowledge sharing. Based upon these goals as well as research and analysis, the following principles were developed to guide the GTRM. 1. The GTRM needs to be diverse and flexible, offering an array of services to accommodate different forms of storage and processing. 2. Development of the GTRM should be phased as emerging ideas are developed. 3. Income should come from multiple and diverse sources to encourage economic sustainability. 4. The market should be infused with an entrepreneurial attitude, where new ideas and investment are created. 5. The market should play a role in increasing access of fresh local food to low-income, underserved residents in the region. 6. The market should complement other Village functions. 7. The market should leverage resources and partnerships with organizations and programs in the region. 8. The market must be operationally self-sufficient.

Based upon these criteria, the results of MVI’s Feasibility Analysis suggest a phased approach to development of the GTRM with Phase I components including: Storage/aggregation/distribution; Food production and Processing with a focus on charcuterie and meat processing; Commercial test/incubator kitchen, and/or aquaponics; Retail-Indoor/outdoor farmers market shed adjacent to building 58; Education and events- eg. demonstration kitchen with adjustable height cooking surfaces; and Office space for food related businesses.

The results of the GTRM feasibility analysis are timely because of increasing state and federal interest in food hubs. For example, the Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development just recently released details of a Value Added/Regional Food System grant to develop value added agricultural processing and regional food systems by facilitating aggregation and distribution of Michigan grown products. Moreover, MSU’s Center for Regional Food Systems just announced that they received Kresge Foundation funding to develop a Michigan Food Hub Network that will connect food hubs around the

state. According to Rich Pirog, Associate Director of the Center and Co-Convenor of the network, the goal is to “facilitate the creation of a learning and innovation space to accelerate food businesses growth and development as well as supply more health Michigan food to our residents.”

With the long-term vision of the Minervini Group and collaboration from multiple partners across the region, the Grand Traverse Regional Market is one step closer to contributing to the states growing \$92 billion agri-food system.

Dr. Rob Serrine is a Community Food Systems Educator with MSU Extension.